POLITE FARCES

BY ARNOLD BENNETT

Novels

THE OLD WIVES' TALE
HELEN WITH THE HIGH HAND
THE MATADOR OF THE FIVE TOWNS
THE BOOK OF CARLOTTA
BURIED ALIVE
A GREAT MAN
LEONORA
WHOM GOD HATH JOINED
A MAN FROM THE NORTH
ANNA OF THE FIVE TOWNS
THE GLIMPSE

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THE HUMAN MACHINE
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CUPID AND COMMONSENSE: A Play
WHAT THE PUBLIC WANTS: A Play
POLITE FARCES: A Play
THE TRUTH ABOUT AN AUTHOR
THE FEAST OF ST. FRIEND

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY
NEW YORK

POLITE FARCES

FOR THE DRAWING-ROOM

BY

ARNOLD BENNETT

Author of "The Old Wives' Tale,"
"How to Live on Twenty-four Hours a Day," etc.

TORONTO
THE MUSSON BOOK COMPANY
LIMITED

TO

F. C. B.

MY BROTHER AND COLLEAGUE

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NOTE

The three farces comprising the present book have been written for drawing-room performance. Dumas *père*, the father of modern drama, once said that all he needed was "four trestles, four boards, two actors, and a passion." For myself, I have dispensed with the trestles, the boards, and the passion, since none of these things is suitable for a drawing-room. The only apparatus necessary to the presentation of the pieces is ordinary costume, ordinary furniture, and a single door for entrance and exit.

A. B.

THE STEPMOTHER

FARCE IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS

Cora Prout, a Popular Novelist and a Widow, 30.

Adrian Prout, her Stepson, 20.

Thomas Gardner, a Doctor, 35.

Christine Feversham, Mrs. Prout's Secretary, 20.

THE STEPMOTHER

SCENE.— *Mrs. Prout's study: luxuriously furnished; large table in centre, upon which are a new novel, press-cuttings, and the usual apparatus of literary composition. Christine is seated at the large table, ready for work, and awaiting the advent of Mrs. Prout. To pass the time she picks up the novel, the leaves of which are not cut, and glances at a page here and there. Enter Mrs. Prout, hurried and preoccupied; the famous novelist is attired in a plain morning gown, which in the perfection of its cut displays the beauty of her figure. She nods absently to Christine, and sits down in an armchair away from the table.*

Christine. Good morning, Mrs. Prout. I'm afraid you are still sleeping badly.

Mrs. Prout. Do I look it, girl?

Christine. You don't specially look it, Mrs. Prout. But I observe. You are my third novelist, and they have all taught me to observe. Before I took up novelists I was with a Member of Parliament, and he never observed anything except five-line whips.

Mrs. Prout. Really! Five-line whips! Oblige

me by putting that down in Notebook No. 2. There will be an M.P. in that wretched thirty-thousand word thing I've promised for the Christmas number of the *New York Surpriser* and it might be useful. I might even make an epigram out of it.

Christine. Yes, Mrs. Prout [*writes*].

Mrs. Prout. And what are your observations about me?

Christine [*while writing*]. Well, this is twice in three weeks that you've been here five minutes late in the morning.

Mrs. Prout. Is that all? You don't think my stuff's falling off?

Christine. Oh, *no*, Mrs. Prout! I *know* it's not falling off. I was just going to tell you. The butler's been in, and wished me to inform you that he begged to give notice [*looking up*]. It seems that last night you ordered him to cut the leaves of our new novel [*patting book maternally*]. He said he just looked into it, and he thinks it's disgraceful to ask a respectable butler to cut the leaves of such a book. So he begs to give warning. Oh, no, Mrs. Prout, your stuff isn't falling off.

Mrs. Prout [*grimly*]. What did you say to him, girl?

Christine. First I looked at him, and then I said, "Brown, you will probably be able to get a place on the reviewing staff of *The Methodist Recorder.*"

Mrs. Prout. Christine, one day, I really believe, you will come to employ a secretary of your own.

Christine. I hope so, Mrs. Prout. But I intend to keep off the morbid introspection line. *You* do that so awfully well. I think I shall go in for smart dialogue, with marquises and country houses, and a touch of old-fashioned human nature at the bottom. It appears to me that's what's coming along very shortly. . . . Shall we begin, Mrs. Prout?

Mrs. Prout [*disinclined*]. Yes, I suppose so [*clearing her throat*]. By the way, anything special in the press-cuttings?

Christine. Nothing very special [*fingering the pile of press-cuttings*]. The *Morning Call* says, "genius in every line."

Mrs. Prout [*blasé*]. Hum!

Christine. The *Daily Reporter:* "Cora Prout may be talented — we should hesitate to deny it — but she is one of several of our leading novelists who should send themselves to a Board School in order to learn grammar."

Mrs. Prout. Grammar again! They must keep a grammar in the office! Personally I think it's frightfully bad form to talk about grammar to a lady. But they never had any taste at the *Reporter.* Don't read me any more. Let us commence work.

Christine. Which will you do, Mrs. Prout?

[*consulting a diary of engagements.*] There's the short story for the *Illustrated Monthly*, six thousand, promised for next Saturday. There's the article on "Women's Diversions" for the *British Review* — they wrote for that yesterday. There's the serial that begins in the *Sunday Daily Sentinel* in September — you've only done half the first instalment of that. And of course there's *Heart Ache.*

Mrs. Prout. I think I'll go on with *Heart Ache.* I feel it coming. I'll do the short story for the *Illustrated* to-morrow. Where had I got to?

Christine [*choosing the correct notebook, reads*]. "The inanimate form of the patient lay like marble on the marble slab of the operating-table. 'The sponge, Nurse,' said the doctor, 'where is it?'" That's where you'd got to.

Mrs. Prout. Yes. I remember. New line. "Isabel gazed at him imperturbably." New line. Quote-marks. "'I fear, Doctor,' she remarked, 'that in a moment of forgetfulness you have sewn it up in our poor patient.'" New line. Quote-marks. "'Damn!' said the doctor, 'so I have.'" Rather good, that, Christine, eh? [*Christine writes in shorthand.*]

Christine. Oh, Mrs. Prout, I think it's beautiful. So staccato and crisp. By the way, I forgot to tell you that there's a leader in the *Daily Snail* on that frightful anonymous attack in the *Forum* against your medical accuracy [*looking at Mrs.*

Prout, who is silent, but shows signs of agitation]. You remember — "Medicine in Fiction." The *Snail* backs up the *Forum* for all it's worth. . . . Mrs. Prout, you *are* ill. I was sure you were. What can I get for you?

Mrs. Prout [*weakly wiping her eyes*]. Nonsense, Christine. I am a little unstrung, that is all. I want nothing.

Christine. Your imagination is too much for you.

Mrs. Prout [*meekly*]. Perhaps so.

Christine [*firmly*]. But it isn't all due to an abnormal imagination. You've never been quite cheerful since you turned Mr. Adrian out.

Mrs. Prout. You forget yourself, Christine.

Christine. I forget nothing, Mrs. Prout, myself least of all. Mr. Adrian is your dead husband's son, and you turned him out of your house, and now you're sorry.

Mrs. Prout. Christine, you know perfectly well that I — er — requested him to go because he would insist on making love to you, which interfered with our work. Besides, it was not quite nice for a man to make love to the secretary of his stepmother. I wonder you are indelicate enough to refer to the matter. You should never have permitted his advances.

Christine. I didn't permit them. I wasn't asked to. I tolerated them. I hadn't been secretary to a lady-novelist with a stepson before, and I

wasn't quite sure what was included in the duties. I always like to give satisfaction.

Mrs. Prout. You do give satisfaction. Let that end the discussion.

Christine [*pouting; turning to her notebook; reads*]. "'Damn!' said the doctor, 'so I have'" [*pause*]. "'Damn!' said the doctor, 'so I have'" [*pause*].

Mrs. Prout. Christine, did you find out who was the author of that article on "Medicine in Fiction"?

Christine. Is *that* what's bothering you, Mrs. Prout? Of course it was a nasty attack, but it is very unlike you to trouble about critics.

Mrs. Prout. It has hurt me more than I can say. That was why I asked you to make a few discreet inquiries.

Christine. I did ask at my club.

Mrs. Prout. And what did they think there?

Christine. They laughed at me, and said every one knew you had written it yourself just to keep the silly season alive, July being a sickly month for reputations.

Mrs. Prout. What did you say to that?

Christine. I should prefer not to repeat it.

Mrs. Prout. Christine, I insist. Your modesty is becoming a disease.

Christine. I said they were fools ——

Mrs. Prout. A little abrupt, perhaps, but effective.

Christine. Not to see that the grammar was different from ours.

Mrs. Prout. Oh! that was what you said, was it?

Christine. It was, and it settled them.

Mrs. Prout [*assuming a confidential air*]. Christine, I believe I know who wrote that article.

Christine. Who?

Mrs. Prout. Dr. Gardner [*bursts into tears*].

Christine [*soothing her*]. But he lives on the floor below, in the very flat underneath this.

Mrs. Prout [*choking back her sobs*]. Yes. It is too dreadful.

Christine. But he comes here nearly every evening.

Mrs. Prout [*sharply*]. Who told you that?

Christine. Now, Mrs. Prout, let me implore you to be calm. The butler told me. I didn't ask him, and as I cannot be expected to foretell what my employer's butler will say before he opens his mouth, I am not to blame [*compresses her lips*]. Shall we continue?

Mrs. Prout. Christine, do you think it was Dr. Gardner? I would give worlds to know.

Christine [*coldly analytic*]. Do you mean that you would give worlds to know that it was Dr. Gardner, or that it wasn't Dr. Gardner? Or would give worlds merely to know the author's name — no matter who he might be?

Mrs. Prout [*sighing*]. You are dreadfully unsympathetic this morning.

Christine. I am placid, nothing else. Please recollect that when you engaged me you asked if you might rely on me to be placid, as your previous secretary, when you dictated the pathetic chapters, had wept so freely into her notebook that she couldn't transcribe her stuff, besides permanently injuring her eyesight. Since you ask my opinion as to Dr. Gardner being the author of this attack on you, I say that he isn't. Apart from the facts that he lives on the floor below, and that he is, so the butler says, a constant visitor in the evenings, there is the additional fact — a fact which I have several times observed for myself without the assistance of the butler — that he likes you.

Mrs. Prout. You have noticed that. It is true. But the question is: Does he like me sufficiently not to attack my work in the public press? That is the point. The writer of that cruel article begins by saying that he has no personal animus, and that he is actuated solely by an enthusiasm for the cause of medicine and the medical profession.

Christine. You mean to infer, Mrs. Prout, that the author of the article might, as a man, like you, while as a doctor he despised you?

Mrs. Prout [*whimpering again*]. That is my suspicion.

Christine. But Dr. Gardner does more than like you. He adores you.

Mrs. Prout. He adores my talent, my genius, my fame, my wealth; but does he adore *me?* I am not an ordinary woman, and it is no use pretending that I am. I must think of these things.

Christine. Neither is Dr. Gardner an ordinary doctor. His researches into toxicology ——

Mrs. Prout. His researches are nothing to me. I wish he wasn't a doctor at all.

Christine. Even doctors have their place in the world, Mrs. Prout.

Mrs. Prout. They should not meddle with fiction, poking their noses ——

Christine. But if fiction meddles with *them?* . . . You know fiction is really very meddlesome. It pokes its nose with great industry.

Mrs. Prout [*pulling herself together*]. Christine, you have never understood me. Let us continue.

Christine [*with an offended air, turning once more to her notebook*]. "'Damn!' said the doctor, 'so I have.'"

Mrs. Prout [*coughing*]. New line. "A smile flashed across the lips of Isabel as she took up a glittering knife ——" [*gives a great sob*]. Oh, Christine! I'm sure Dr. Gardner wrote it.

Christine. Very well, madam. He wrote it. We have at last settled something. [*Mrs. Prout buries her face in her hands. Christine looks up, and after an instant's pause springs toward her.*] You poor dear! You are perfectly hysterical this

morning. You must go and lie down for a little. A horizontal posture is what you need.

Mrs. Prout. Perhaps you are right. I will leave you for an hour [*totters to her feet*]. Take down this note for Dr. Gardner. He may call this morning. In fact, I rather think he will. "The answer to the question is 'No'"— capital *N*.

Christine. Shall I sign it?

Mrs. Prout. Yes; sign it "C. P." And if he comes, give it him yourself, and say that I can see no one. And, Christine, would you mind [*crying gently again*] seeing the b-b-butler, and try to reason him into a sensible attitude towards my n-n-novels. In my present state of health I couldn't stand any change. And he is so admirable at table.

Christine. Shall I offer some compromise in our next novel? I might inquire what is the irreducible minimum of his demands.

Mrs. Prout [*faintly*]. Anything, anything, if he will stay.

Christine [*following Mrs. Prout to the door, and touching her shoulder caressingly*]. Try to sleep. [*Exit Mrs. Prout. Christine whistles in a low tone as she returns meditatively to her seat.*]

Christine [*looking at notebook*]. "Isabel took up a glittering knife," did she? "The answer to the question is 'No,'" with a capital *N*. "C. P." sounds like Carter Paterson. Now, as I have nothing to do, I think I will devote the morning to an article on "Hysteria in Lady Novelists." Um!

Ah! "The answer to the question is 'No'"—capital *N*. What question? Can it be that the lily-white hand of the author of *Heart Ache* has . . . [*knock*]. Come in. [*Enter Dr. Gardner.*]

Gardner. Oh, good morning, Miss Feversham.

Christine. Good morning, Dr. Gardner. You seem surprised to see me here. Yet I am to be found in this chair daily at this hour.

Gardner. Not at all, not at all. I assure you I fully expected to find both you and the chair. I also expected to find Mrs. Prout.

Christine. Are you capable of interrupting our literary labours? We do not receive callers so early, Dr. Gardner. Which reminds that I have several times remarked that this study ought not to have a door opening into the corridor.

Gardner. As for that, may I venture to offer the excuse that I had an appointment with Mrs. Prout?

Christine. At what hour? She never makes appointments before noon.

Gardner. I believe she did say twelve o'clock.

Christine [*looking at her watch*]. And it is now twenty-five minutes to ten. Punctuality is a virtue. You may be said to have raised it to the dignity of a fine art.

Gardner. I will wait [*sits down*]. I trust I do not interrupt?

Christine. Yes, Doctor, I regret to say that

you do. I was about to commence the composition of an article.

Gardner. Upon what?

Christine. Upon "Hysteria in Lady Novelists." It is my specialty.

Gardner. Surely lady novelists are not hysterical?

Christine. The increase of hysteria among that class of persons is one of the saddest features of the age.

Gardner. Dear me! [*enthusiastically*]. But I can tell you the name of one lady novelist who isn't hysterical — and that, perhaps, the greatest name of all — Mrs. Prout.

Christine. *Of course* not, of course not, Doctor. Nevertheless, Mrs. Prout is somewhat indisposed this morning.

Gardner. Cora — ill! What is it? Nothing serious?

Christine. Rest assured. The merest slight indisposition. Just sufficient to delay us an hour or two with our work. Nothing more. Nerves, you know. The imagination of a great artist, Dr. Gardner, is often too active, too stressful, for the frail physical organism.

Gardner. Ah! You regard Mrs. Prout as a great artist?

Christine. Doctor — even to ask such a question . . .! Do not you?

Gardner. I? To me she is unique. I say, Miss Feversham, were you ever in love?

Christine. In love? I have had preferences.

Gardner. Among men?

Christine. No; among boys. Recollect I am only twenty, though singularly precocious in shrewdness and calm judgment.

Gardner. Twenty? You amaze me, Miss Feversham. I have often been struck by your common sense and knowledge of the world. They would do credit to a woman of fifty.

Christine. I am glad to notice that you do not stoop to offer me vulgar compliments about my face.

Gardner. I am incapable of such conduct. I esteem your mental qualities too highly. And so you have had your preferences among boys?

Christine. Yes, I like to catch them from eighteen to twenty. They are so sweet and fresh then, like new milk. The *employé* of the Express Dairy Company who leaves me my half-pint at my lodgings each morning is a perfectly lovely dear. I adore him.

Gardner. He is one of your preferences, then?

Christine. A preference among milkmen, of whom, as I change my lodgings frequently, I have known many. Then there is the postman — not a day more than eighteen, I am sure, though that is

contrary to the regulations of St. Martin's-le-Grand. Dr. Gardner, you *should* see my postman. When *he* brings them I can receive even rejected articles with equanimity.

Gardner. I should be charmed to see him. But tell me, Miss Feversham, have you had no serious preferences?

Christine. You seem interested in this question of preferences.

Gardner. I am.

Christine. Doctor, I will open my heart to you. It is conceivable you may be of use to me. You are on friendly terms with Adrian, and doubtless you know the history of his exit from this house. [*Gardner nods, with a smile.*] Doctor, he and I are passionately attached to each other. Our ages are precisely alike. It is a beautiful idyll, or rather it would be, if dear Mrs. Prout did not try to transform it into a tragedy. She has not only turned the darling boy out, but she has absolutely forbidden him the house.

Gardner. Doubtless she had her reasons.

Christine. Oh, I'm *sure* she had. Only, you see, her reasons aren't ours. Of course we could marry at once if we chose. I could easily keep Adrian. I do not, however, wish to inconvenience dear Mrs. Prout. It is a mistake to quarrel with the rich relations of one's future husband. But I was thinking that perhaps you, Doctor, might persuade dear Mrs. Prout that my marriage to

Adrian need not necessarily interfere with the performance of my duties as her secretary.

Gardner. Anything that I can do, Miss Feversham, you may rely on me doing.

Christine. You are a dear.

Gardner. But why should you imagine that I have any influence with Mrs. Prout?

Christine. I do not imagine; I know. It is my unerring insight over again, my faultless observation. Doctor, you did not begin to question me about love because you were interested in *my* love affairs, but because you were interested in your own, and couldn't keep off the subject. I read you like a book. You love Mrs. Prout, my dear Doctor. Therefore you have influence over her. No woman is uninfluenced by the man who loves her.

Gardner [*laughing between self-satisfaction and self-consciousness*]. You have noticed that I admire Mrs. Prout? It appears that nothing escapes you.

Christine. That is a trifle. The butler has noticed it.

Gardner. The butler!

Christine. The butler.

Gardner [*with abandon*]. Let him. Let the whole world notice. Miss Feversham, be it known that I love Mrs. Prout with passionate adoration. Before the day is out I shall either be her affianced bridegroom — or I shall be a dead man.

Christine [*leaning forward; in a low, tense voice*]. You proposed to her last night?

Gardner. I did.

Christine. And you were to come for the answer this morning?

Gardner. Yes. Can you not guess that I am eager — excited? Can you not pardon me for thinking it is noon at twenty-five minutes to ten? Ah, Miss Feversham, if Adrian adores you with one-tenth of the fire with which I adore Mrs. Prout ——

Christine. Stop, Doctor. I do not wish to be a burnt sacrifice. Now let me ask you a question. You have seen that attack on Mrs. Prout, entitled "Medicine in Fiction," in this month's *Forum*. Do you know the author of it?

Gardner. I don't. Has it disturbed Mrs. Prout?

Christine. It has. Did she not mention it to you?

Gardner. Not a word. If I did know the author of it, if I ever do know the author of it, I will tear him [*fiercely*] limb from limb.

Christine. I trust you will chloroform him first. It will be horrid of you if you don't.

Gardner. I absolutely decline to chloroform him first.

Christine. You must.

Gardner. I won't.

Christine. Never mind. Perhaps you will be

dead. Remember that you have promised to kill yourself to-day on a certain contingency. Should you really do it? Should you really put an end to your life if Mrs. Prout gave you a refusal?

Gardner. I swear it. Existence would be valueless to me.

Christine. By the way, Mrs. Prout told me that if you called I was to say that she could see no one.

Gardner. See no one! But she promised . . .

Christine. However, she left a note.

Gardner [*starting up*]. Give it me instantly. Why didn't you give it me before?

Christine. I had no opportunity. Besides, I haven't transcribed it yet. It was dictated.

Gardner. Dictated? Are you sure?

Christine [*seriously*]. Oh, yes, she dictates *everything.*

Gardner. Well, well, read it to me, read it to me. Quick, I say.

Christine [*turning over leaves rapidly*]. Here it is. Are you listening?

Gardner. Great Heaven!

Christine [*reads from her shorthand note*]. "The answer to your question is ——"

Gardner. Go on.

Christine [*drawing her breath first*]. "Yes.—C. P." There! I've saved your life for you.

Gardner. You have indeed, my dear girl. But

I must see her. I must see my beloved Cora.

Christine [*taking his hand*]. Accept my advice, Doctor — the advice of a simple, artless girl. Do not attempt to see her to-day. There are seasons of emotion when a woman [*stops*]. . . . Go downstairs and write to her, and then give the letter to me. [*Pats him on the back.*]

Gardner. I will, by Jove. Miss Feversham, you're a good sort. And as you've told me something, I'll tell you something. Adrian is going to storm the castle to-day.

Christine. Adrian! [*A knock. Enter Adrian.*]

Adrian. Since you command it, I enter.

Gardner. Let me pass, bold youth. [*Exit Dr. Gardner hurriedly.*]

Adrian [*overcome by Gardner's haste*]. Why this avalanche? Has something happened suddenly?

Christine. Several things have happened suddenly, Adrian, and several more will probably happen when your mamma discovers that you are defying her orders in this audacious manner. Why are you here? [*Kisses him.*] You perfect duck!

Adrian [*gravely*]. I am not here, Miss Feversham ——

Christine. "Miss Feversham" — and my kiss still warm on his lips!

Adrian. I repeat, Miss Feversham, that I am not here. This [*pointing to himself*] is not I. It is merely a rather smart member of the staff of the

Daily Snail, come to interview Cora Prout, the celebrated novelist.

Christine. And I have kissed a *Snail* reporter. Ugh!

Adrian. Impetuosity has ruined many women.

Christine. It is a morning of calamities [*assuming the secretarial pose*]. Your card, please.

Adrian [*handing card*]. With pleasure.

Christine [*taking card by the extreme corner, perusing it with disdain, and then dropping it on the floor*]. We never see interviewers in the morning.

Adrian. Then I will call this afternoon.

Christine. You must write for an appointment.

Adrian. Oh! I'll take my chances, thanks.

Christine. We never give them: it is our rule. We have to be very particular. The fact is, we hate being interviewed, and we only submit to the process out of a respectful regard for the great and enlightened public. Any sort of notoriety, any suggestion of self-advertisement, is distasteful to us. What do you wish to interview us about? If it's the new novel, we are absolutely mum. Accept that from me.

Adrian. It isn't the new novel. The *Snail* wishes to know whether Mrs. Prout feels inclined to make any statement in reply to that article, "'Medicine in Fiction," in the *Forum*.

Christine. Oh, Adrian, do you know anything about that article?

Adrian. Rather! I know *all* about it.

Christine. You treasure! You invaluable darling! I will marry you to-morrow morning by special licence ——

Adrian. Recollect, it is a *Snail* reporter whom you are addressing. Suppose I were to print that!

Christine. Just so. You are prudence itself, while I, for the moment, happen to be a little — a little abnormal. I saved a man's life this morning, and it is apt to upset one's nerves. It is a dreadful thing to do — to save a man's life. And the consequences will be simply frightful for me [*buries her face in her hands*].

Adrian. Christine [*taking her hands*], what are you raving about? You are not yourself.

Christine. I wish I wasn't [*looking up with forced calm*]. Adrian, there is a possibility of your being able to save me from the results of my horrible act, if only you will tell me the name of the author of that article in the *Forum.*

Adrian [*tenderly*]. Christine, you little know what you ask. But for you I will do anything. . . . Kiss me, my white lily. [*She kisses him.*]

Christine [*whispers*]. Tell me. [*He folds her up in his arms.*]

Enter Mrs. Prout excitedly.

Mrs. Prout [*as she enters*]. Christine, that appalling butler has actually left the house . . . [*observing group*]. Heavens!

Christine [*quietly disengaging herself*]. You seem a little better, Mrs. Prout. A person to interview you from the *Daily Snail* [*pointing to Adrian*].

Mrs. Prout. Adrian!

Adrian. Yes, Mamma.

Mrs. Prout [*opening her lips to speak and then closing them*]. Sit down.

Adrian. Certainly, Mamma [*sits*].

Mrs. Prout. How dare you come here?

Adrian. I don't know how, Mamma [*picks up his card from the floor and hands it to her; then resumes his seat*].

Mrs. Prout [*glancing at card*]. Pah!

Christine. That's just what I told the person, Mrs. Prout. [*Mrs. Prout burns her up with a glance.*]

Mrs. Prout. You have, then, abandoned your medical studies, for which I had paid all the fees?

Adrian. Yes, Mamma. You see, I was obliged to earn something at once. So I took to journalism. I am getting on quite nicely. The editor of the *Snail* says that I may review your next book.

Mrs. Prout. Unnatural stepson, to review in cold blood the novel of your own stepmother! But this morning I am getting used to misfortunes.

Adrian. It cuts me to the heart to hear you refer to any action of mine as a misfortune for you. Perhaps you would prefer that I should at once relieve you of my presence?

Mrs. Prout. Decidedly, yes — that is, if Christine thinks she can do without the fifth act of that caress which I interrupted.

Christine. The curtain was already falling, madam.

Mrs. Prout. Very well. [*To Adrian.*] Good-day.

Adrian. As a stepson I retire. As the "special" of the *Daily Snail* I must insist on remaining. A "special" of the *Daily Snail* is incapable of being snubbed. He knows what he wants, and he gets it, or he ceases to be a "special" of the *Daily Snail.*

Mrs. Prout. I esteem the press, and though I should prefer an existence of absolute privacy, I never refuse its demands. I sacrifice myself to my public, freely acknowledging that a great artist has no exclusive right to the details of his own daily life. A great artist belongs to the world. What is it you want, Mr. Snail?

Adrian. I want to know whether you care to say anything in reply to that article on "Medicine in Fiction" in the *Forum.*

Mrs. Prout [*sinking back in despair*]. That article again! [*sitting up*]. Tell me — do you know the author?

Adrian. I do.

Mrs. Prout. His name!

Adrian. He is a friend of mine.

Mrs. Prout. His name!

Adrian. I am informed that in writing it he was actuated by the highest motives. His desire was not only to make a little money, but to revenge himself against a person who had deeply injured him. He didn't know much about medicine, being only a student, and probably the larger part of his arguments could not be sustained, but he knew enough to make a show, and he made it.

Mrs. Prout. His name! I insist.

Adrian. Adrian Spout or Prout — I have a poor memory. . . .

Mrs. Prout. Is it possible?

Christine. Monster!

Adrian. Need I defend myself, Mamma? Consider what you had done to me. You had devastated my young heart, which was just unfolding to its first passion. You had blighted the springtime of the exquisite creature [*looking at Christine, who is moved by the feeling in his tones*] — the exquisite creature who was dearer to me than all the world. In place of the luxury of my late father's house you offered me — the street. . . .

Christine. Yes . . . and Gower Street.

Adrian. You, who should have gently fostered and encouraged the frail buds of my energy and intelligence — you cast me forth . . .

Christine. Cast *them* forth.

Adrian. Cast *them* forth, untimely plucked, to wither, and perhaps die, in the deserts of a great city. And for what? For what?

Christine. Merely lest she should be deprived of *my* poor services. Ah! Mrs. Prout, can you wonder that Mr. Adrian should actively resent such conduct — you with your marvellous knowledge of human nature?

Mrs. Prout. Adrian, did you really write it?

Adrian. Why, of course. You seem rather pleased than otherwise, Mamma.

Mrs. Prout [*after cogitating*]. Ah! You didn't write it, really. You are just boasting. It is a plot, a plot!

Adrian. I can prove that I wrote it, since you impugn my veracity.

Mrs. Prout. How can you prove it?

Adrian. By producing the cheque which I received from the *Forum* this very morning.

Mrs. Prout. Produce it, and I will forgive all.

Adrian [*with a sign to Christine that he entirely fails to comprehend the situation*]. I fly. It is in my humble attic, round the corner. Back in two minutes. [*Exit Adrian.*]

Mrs. Prout. Christine, *did* he really write it?

Christine. Can you doubt his word? Was it for lying that you ejected the poor youth from this residence?

Mrs. Prout. Ah! If he did! [*smiles.*] Of course Dr. Gardner has not called?

Christine. Yes, he was in about twenty minutes ago.

Mrs. Prout [*agonised*]. Did you give him my note?

Christine. No.

Mrs. Prout. Thank Heaven!

Christine. I had not copied it out, so I read it to him.

Mrs. Prout. You read it to him?

Christine. Yes; that seemed the obvious thing to do.

Mrs. Prout [*in black despair*]. All is over [*sinks back*].

Enter Dr. Gardner hastily.

Christine. Again?

Gardner [*excited*]. I was looking out of the window of my flat when I saw Adrian tear along the street. I said to myself, "A man, even a reporter, only runs like that when a doctor is required, and urgently required. Some one is ill, perhaps my darling Cora." So I flew upstairs.

Mrs. Prout [*with a shriek*]. Dr. Gardner!

Gardner. You *are* indeed ill, my beloved [*approaching her*]. What is the matter?

Mrs. Prout [*waving him off*]. It is nothing, Doctor. Could you get me some salts? I have mislaid mine [*sighs*].

Gardner. Salts! In an instant. [*Exit Dr. Gardner.*]

Mrs. Prout. Christine, you said you read my note to Dr. Gardner.

Christine. Yes, Mrs. Prout.

Mrs. Prout. His behaviour is singular in the extreme. He seems positively overjoyed, while the freedom of his endearing epithets —— What were the precise terms I used? Read me the note.

Christine. Yes, Mrs. Prout [*reads demurely*]. "The answer to your question is 'Yes,'" — with a capital *N*.

Mrs. Prout. "Yes" with a capital *N*?

Christine [*calmly*]. I mean with a capital *Y*. [*Christine and Mrs. Prout look steadily at each other. Then they both smile. Enter Dr. Gardner.*]

Gardner [*handing the salts*]. You are sure you are not ill?

Mrs. Prout [*smiling at him radiantly*]. I am convinced of it. Christine, will you kindly reach me down the dictionary from that shelf? [*While Christine's back is turned Dr. Gardner gives, and Mrs. Prout returns, a passionate kiss*].

Christine [*handing dictionary*]. Here it is, Mrs. Prout.

Mrs. Prout [*after consulting it*]. I thought I could not be mistaken. Christine, you have rendered me a service [*regarding her affectionately*] — a service for which I shall not forget to express my gratitude; but I am obliged to dismiss you instantly from my service.

Christine. Dismiss me, madam?

Gardner. Cora, can you be so cruel?

Mrs. Prout. Alas, yes! She has sinned the secretarial sin which is beyond forgiveness. She has misspelt.

Gardner. Impossible!

Mrs. Prout. It is too true.

Gardner. Tell me the sad details.

Mrs. Prout. She has been guilty of spelling "No" with a "Y."

Gardner. Dear me! And a word of one syllable, too! Miss Feversham, I should not have thought it of you. [*Enter Adrian.*]

Adrian [*as he hands a cheque for Mrs. Prout's inspection*]. Here again, Doctor?

Gardner. Yes, and to stay.

Mrs. Prout. Adrian, the Doctor and I are engaged to be married. And talking of marriage, you observe that girl there in the corner. Take her and marry her at the earliest convenient moment. She is no longer my secretary.

Adrian. What! You consent?

Mrs. Prout. I consent.

Adrian. And you pardon my article?

Mrs. Prout. No, my dear Adrian, I ignore it. Here, take your ill-gotten gains [*returning cheque*]. They will bring you no good. And since they will bring you no good, I have decided to allow you the sum of five hundred pounds a year. You must have something.

Adrian. Stepmother!

Christine [*advancing to take Mrs. Prout's hand*]. Stepmother-in-law!

Gardner. Cora, you are an angel.

Mrs. Prout. Merely an artist, my dear Tom, merely an artist. I have the dramatic sense — that is all.

Adrian. Your sense is more than dramatic, it is common; it is even horse. What about the *Snail* "special," mummy?

Mrs. Prout. My attitude is one of strict silence.

Adrian. But I must go away with something.

Mrs. Prout. Strict silence. The attack is beneath my notice.

Adrian. But what can I *say?*

Christine. Say that Mrs. Prout's late secretary, Miss Feversham, having retired from her post, has already entered upon a career of original literary composition. That will be a nice newsy item, won't it?

Adrian [*taking out notebook*]. Rather! What is she at work on?

Christine. Oh, well, I scarcely ——

Gardner. I know —" Hysteria in Lady Novelists."

Mrs. Prout. What?

Gardner [*to Christine*]. Didn't you tell me so?

Christine. Of course I didn't, Doctor. What

a shocking memory you have! It is worse than my spelling.

Gardner. Then what did you say?

Christine. I said, "Generosity in Lady Novelists."

[*Curtain.*]

[1899]

A GOOD WOMAN

FARCE IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS

James Brett, a Clerk in the War Office, 33.

Gerald O'Mara, a Civil Engineer, 24.

Rosamund Fife, a Spinster and a Lecturer on Cookery, 28.

A GOOD WOMAN

SCENE.— *Rosamund's Flat; the drawing-room. The apartment is plainly furnished. There is a screen in the corner of the room furthest from the door. It is 9 a. m. Rosamund is seated alone at a table. She wears a neat travelling-dress, with a plain straw hat. Her gloves lie on a chair. A small portable desk full of papers is open before her. She gazes straight in front of her, smiling vaguely. With a start she recovers from her day-dreams, and rushing to the looking-glass, inspects her features therein. Then she looks at her watch.*

Rosamund. Three hours yet! I'm a fool [*with decision. She sits down again, and idly picks up a paper out of the desk. The door opens, unceremoniously but quietly, and James enters. The two stare at each other, James wearing a conciliatory smile*].

Rosamund. You appalling creature!

James. I couldn't help it, I simply couldn't help it.

Rosamund. Do you know this is the very height and summit of indelicacy?

James. I was obliged to come.

Rosamund. If I had any relations ——

James. Which you haven't.

Rosamund. I say *if* I had any relations ——

James. I say *which* you haven't.

Rosamund. Never mind, it is a safe rule for unattached women always to behave as if they had relations, especially female relations, whether they have any or not. My remark is, that if I had any relations they would be absolutely scandalised by this atrocious conduct of yours.

James. What have I done?

Rosamund. Can you ask? Here are you, and here am I. We are to be married to-day at twelve o'clock. The ceremony has not taken place, and yet you are found on my premises. You must surely be aware that on the day of the wedding the parties — yes, the "parties," that is the word — should on no account see each other till they see each other in church.

James. But since we are to be married at a registry office, does the rule apply?

Rosamund. Undoubtedly.

James. Then I must apologise. My excuse is that I am not up in these minute details of circumspection; you see I have been married so seldom.

Rosamund. Evidently. [*A pause, during which James at last ventures to approach the middle of the room.*] Now you must go back home,

and we'll pretend we haven't seen each other.

James. Never, Rosamund! That would be acting a lie. And I couldn't dream of getting married with a lie on my lips. It would be so unusual. No; we have sinned, or rather I have sinned, on this occasion. I will continue to sin — openly, brazenly. Come here, my dove. A bird in the hand is worth two under a bushel. [*He assumes an attitude of entreaty, and, leaving her chair, Rosamund goes towards him. They exchange an ardent kiss.*]

Rosamund [*quietly submissive*]. I'm awfully busy, you know, Jim.

James. I will assist you in your little duties, dearest, and then I will accompany you to the sacred ed—— to the registry office. Now, what were you doing? [*She sits down, and he puts a chair for himself close beside her.*]

Rosamund. You are singularly unlike yourself this morning, dearest.

James. Nervous tension, my angel. I should have deemed it impossible that an *employé* of the War Office could experience the marvellous and exquisite sensations now agitating my heart. But tell me, what are you doing with these papers?

Rosamund. Well, I was just going to look through them and see if they contained anything of a remarkable or valuable nature. You see, I hadn't anything to occupy myself with.

James. Was 'oo bored, waiting for the timey-pimey to come?

Rosamund [*hands caressing*]. 'Iss, little pet was bored, she was. Was Mr. Pet lonely this morning? Couldn't he keep away from his little cooky-lecturer? He should see his little cooky-lecturer.

James. And that reminds me, hadn't we better lunch in the train instead of at Willis's? That will give us more time?

Rosamund. Horrid greedy piggywiggy! Perhaps he will be satisfied if Mrs. Pet agrees to lunch both at Willis's and in the train?

James. Yes. Only piggywiggy doesn't want to trespass on Mrs. Pet's good nature. Let piggywiggy look at the papers. [*He takes up a paper from the desk.*]

Rosamund [*a little seriously*]. No, Jimmy. I don't think we'll go through them. Perhaps it wouldn't be wise. Just let's destroy them. [*Takes paper from his hand and drops it in desk.*]

James [*sternly*]. When you have been the wife of a War Office clerk for a week you will know that papers ought never to be destroyed. Now I come to think, it is not only my right but my duty to examine this secret *dossier*. Who knows —— [*Takes up at random another document, which proves to be a postcard. Reads.*] "Shall come to-morrow night. Thine, Gerald."

Rosamund [*after a startled shriek of consterna-*

tion]. There! There! You've done it, first time! [*She begins to think, with knitted brows.*]

James. Does this highly suspicious postcard point to some — some episode in your past of which you have deemed it advisable to keep me in ignorance? If so, I seek not to inquire. I forgive you — I take you, Rosamund, as you are!

Rosamund [*reflective, not heeding his remark*]. I had absolutely forgotten the whole affair, absolutely. [*Smiles a little. Aside.*] Suppose he should come! [*To James.*] Jim, I think I had better tell you all about Gerald. It will interest you. Besides, there is no knowing what may happen.

James. As I have said, I seek not to inquire. [*Stiffly.*] Nor do I imagine that this matter, probably some childish entanglement, would interest me.

Rosamund. Oh, wouldn't it! Jim, don't be absurd. You know perfectly well you are dying to hear.

James. Very well, save my life, then, at the least expense of words. To begin with, who is this Gerald — "thine," thine own Gerald?

Rosamund. Don't you remember Gerald O'Mara? You met him at the Stokes's, I feel sure. You know — the young engineer.

James. Oh! *That* ass!

Rosamund. He isn't an ass. He's a very nice boy.

James. For the sake of argument and dispatch, agreed! Went out to Cyprus or somewhere, didn't he, to build a bridge, or make a dock, or dig a well, or something of that kind?

Rosamund [*nodding*]. Now listen, I'll tell you *all* about it. [*Settles herself for a long narration.*] Four years ago poor, dear Gerald was madly in love with me. He was twenty and I was twenty-four. Keep calm — I felt like his aunt. Don't forget I was awfully pretty in those days. Well, he was so tremendously in love that in order to keep him from destroying himself — of course, I knew he was going out to Cyprus — I sort of pretended to be sympathetic. I simply *had* to; Irishmen are so passionate. And he was very nice. And I barely knew you then. Well, the time approached for him to leave for Cyprus, and two days before the ship sailed he sent me that very postcard that by pure chance you picked up.

James. He should have written a letter.

Rosamund. Ah! I expect he couldn't wait. He was so impulsive. Well, on the night before he left England he came here and proposed to me. I remember I was awfully tired and queer. I had been giving a lecture in the afternoon on "How to Pickle Pork," and the practical demonstration had been rather smelly. However, the proposal braced me up. It was the first I had had — that year. Well, I was so sorry for him that I couldn't say "No" outright. It would have been too bru-

tal. He might have killed himself on the spot, and spoilt this carpet, which, by the way, was new then. So I said, "Look here, Gerald ——"

James. You called him "Gerald"?

Rosamund. *Rather!* "Look here, Gerald," I said; "you are going to Cyprus for four years. If your feeling towards me is what you think it is, come back to me at the end of those four years, and I will then give you an answer." Of course I felt absolutely sure that in the intervening period he would fall in and out of love half a dozen times at least.

James. Of course, half a dozen times at least; probably seven. What did he say in reply?

Rosamund. He agreed with all the seriousness in the world. "On this day four years hence," he said, standing just there [*pointing*], "I will return for your answer. And in the meantime I will live only for you." That was what he said — his very words.

James. And a most touching speech, too! And then?

Rosamund. We shook hands, and he tore himself away, stifling a sob. Don't forget, he was a boy.

James. Have the four years expired?

Rosamund. What is the date of that postcard? Let me see it. [*Snatches it, and smiles at the handwriting pensively.*] July 4th — four years ago.

James. Then it's over. He's not coming. To-day is July 5th.

Rosamund. But yesterday was Sunday. He wouldn't come on Sunday. He was always very particular and nice.

James. Do you mean to imply that you think he will come to-day and demand from you an affirmative? A moment ago you gave me to understand that in your opinion he would have — er — other affairs to attend to.

Rosamund. Yes. I did think so at the time. But now — now I have a kind of idea that he may come, that after all he may have remained faithful. You know I was maddeningly pretty then, and he had my photograph.

James. Tell me, have you corresponded?

Rosamund. No, I expressly forbade it.

James. Ah!

Rosamund. But still, I have a premonition he may come.

James [*assuming a pugnacious pose*]. If he does, I will attend to him.

Rosamund. Gerald was a terrible fighter. [*A resounding knock is heard at the door. Both start violently, and look at each other in silence. Rosamund goes to the door and opens it.*]

Rosamund [*with an unsteady laugh of relief*]. Only the postman with a letter. [*She returns to her seat.*] No, I don't expect he will come, really.

[*Puts letter idly on table. Another knock still louder. Renewed start.*]

Rosamund. Now that *is* he, I'm positive. He always knocked like that. Just fancy. After four years! Jim, just take the chair behind that screen for a bit. I *must* hide you.

James. No, thanks! The screen dodge is a trifle *too* frayed at the edges.

Rosamund. Only for a minute. It would be *such* fun.

James. No, thanks. [*Another knock.*]

Rosamund [*with forced sweetness*]. Oh, very well, then. . . .

James. Oh, well, of course, if you take it in that way —— [*He proceeds to a chair behind screen, which does not, however, hide him from the audience.*]

Rosamund [*smiles his reward*]. I'll explain it all right. [*Loudly.*] Come in! [*Enter Gerald O'Mara.*]

Gerald. So you are in! [*Hastens across room to shake hands.*]

Rosamund. Oh, yes, I am in. Gerald, how are you? I must say you look tolerably well. [*They sit down.*]

Gerald. Oh! I'm pretty fit, thanks. Had the most amazing time in spite of the climate. And you? Rosie, you haven't changed a little bit. How's the cookery trade getting along? Are you

still showing people how to concoct French dinners out of old bones and a sardine tin?

Rosamund. Certainly. Only I can do it without the bones now. You see, the science has progressed while you've been stagnating in Cyprus.

Gerald. Stagnating is the word. You wouldn't believe that climate!

Rosamund. What! Not had nice weather? What a shame! I thought it was tremendously sunshiny in Cyprus.

Gerald. Yes, that's just what it is, 97° in the shade when it doesn't happen to be pouring with malarial rain. We started a little golf club at Nicosia, and laid out a nine-hole course. But the balls used to melt. So we had to alter the rules, keep the balls in an ice-box, and take a fresh one at every hole. Think of that!

Rosamund. My poor boy! But I suppose there were compensations? You referred to "an amazing time."

Gerald. Yes, there were compensations. And that reminds me, I want you to come out and lunch with me at the Savoy. I've got something awfully important to ask you. In fact, that's what I've come for.

Rosamund. Sorry I can't, Gerald. The fact is, I've got something awfully important on myself just about lunch time.

Gerald. Oh, yours can wait. Look here, I've

ordered the lunch. I made sure you'd come. [*Rosamund shakes her head.*] Why can't you? It's not cooking, is it?

Rosamund. Only a goose.

Gerald. What goose?

Rosamund. Well — my own, and somebody else's. Listen, Gerald. Had you not better ask me this awfully important question now? No time like the present.

Gerald. I can always talk easier, especially on delicate topics, with a pint of something handy. But if you positively won't come, I'll get it off my chest now. The fact is, Rosie, I'm in love.

Rosamund. With whom?

Gerald. Ah! That's just what I want you to tell me.

Rosamund [*suddenly starting*]. Gerald! what is that dreadful thing sticking out of your pocket, and pointing right *at* me?

Gerald. That? That's my revolver. Always carry them in Cyprus, you know. Plenty of sport there.

Rosamund [*breathing again*]. Kindly take it out of your pocket and put it on the table. Then if it does go off, it will go off into something less valuable than a cookery-lecturer.

Gerald [*laughingly obeying her*]. There. If anything happens it will happen to the screen. Now, Rosie, I'm in love, and I desire that you should tell me whom I'm in love with. There's a

magnificent girl in Cyprus, daughter of the Superintendent of Police ——

Rosamund. Name?

Gerald. Evelyn. Age nineteen. I tell you I was absolutely gone on her.

Rosamund. Symptoms?

Gerald. Well — er — whenever her name was mentioned I blushed terrifically. Of course, that was only one symptom. . . . Then I met a girl on the home steamer — no father or mother. An orphan, you know, awfully interesting.

Rosamund. Name?

Gerald. Madge. Nice name, isn't it? [*Rosamund nods.*] I don't mind telling you, I was considerably struck by her — still am, in fact.

Rosamund. Symptoms?

Gerald. Oh! . . . Let me see, I never think of her without turning absolutely pale. I suppose it's what they call "pale with passion." Notice it?

Rosamund [*somewhat coldly*]. It seems to me the situation amounts to this. There are two girls. One is named Evelyn, and the thought of her makes you blush. The other is named Madge, and the thought of her makes you turn pale. You fancy yourself in love, and you wish me to decide for you whether it is Madge or Evelyn who agitates your breast the more deeply.

Gerald. That's not exactly the way to put it, Rosie. You take a fellow up too soon. Of course

I must tell you lots more yet. You should hear Evelyn play the "Moonlight Sonata." It's the most marvellous thing. . . . And then Madge's eyes! The way that girl can look at a fellow. . . . I'm telling you all these things, you know, Rosie, because I've always looked up to you as an elder sister.

Rosamund [*after a pause, during which she gazes into his face*]. I suppose it was in my character of your elder sister, that you put a certain question to me four years ago last night?

Gerald [*staggered; pulls himself together for a great resolve; after a long pause*]. Rosie! I never thought afterwards you'd take it seriously. I forgot it all. I was only a boy then. [*Speaking quicker and quicker.*] But I see clearly now. I never *could* withstand you. It's all rot about Evelyn and Madge. It's you I'm in love with; and I never guessed it! Rosie! . . . [*Rushes to her and impetuously flings his arms around her neck.*]

James [*who, during the foregoing scene, has been full of uneasy gestures; leaping with incredible swiftness from the shelter of the screen*]. Sir!

Rosamund [*pushing Gerald quietly away*]. Gerald!

James. May I inquire, sir, what is the precise significance of this attitudinising? [*Gerald has scarcely yet abandoned his amorous pose, but now does so quickly.*] Are we in the middle of a scene

from "Romeo and Juliet," or is this 9:30 A. M. in the nineteenth century? If Miss Fife had played the "Moonlight Sonata" to you, or looked at you as Madge does, there might perhaps have been some shadow of an excuse for your extraordinary and infamous conduct. But since she has performed neither of these feats of skill, I fail to grasp — I say I fail to grasp — er ——

Gerald [*slowly recovering from an amazement which has rendered him mute*]. Rosie, a man concealed in your apartment! But perhaps it is the piano-tuner. I am willing to believe the best.

Rosamund. Let me introduce Mr. James Brett, my future husband. Jim, this is Gerald.

James. I have gathered as much. [*The men bow stiffly.*]

Rosamund [*dreamily*]. Poor, poor Gerald! [*Her tone is full of feeling. James is evidently deeply affected by it. He walks calmly and steadily to the table and picks up the revolver.*]

Gerald. Sir, that tool is mine.

James. Sir, the fact remains that it is an engine of destruction, and that I intend to use it. Rosamund, the tone in which you uttered those three words, "Poor, poor Gerald!" convinces me, a keen observer of symptoms, that I no longer possess your love. Without your love, life to me is meaningless. I object to anything meaningless — even a word. I shall therefore venture to deprive myself of life. Good-bye! [*To Gerald.*] Sir, I

may see you later. [*Raises the revolver to his temples.*]

Rosamund [*appealing to Gerald to interfere*]. Gerald!

Gerald. Mr. Brett, I repeat that that revolver is mine. It would be a serious breach of good manners if you used it without my consent, a social solecism of which I believe you, as a friend of Miss Fife's, to be absolutely incapable. Still, as the instrument happens to be in your hand, you may use it — but not on yourself. Have the goodness, sir, to aim at me. I could not permit myself to stand in the way of another's happiness, as I should do if I continued to exist. At the same time I have conscientious objections to suicide. You will therefore do me a service by aiming straight. Above all things, don't hit Miss Fife. I merely mention it because I perceive that you are unaccustomed to the use of firearms. [*Folds his arms.*]

James. Rosamund, *do* you love me?

Rosamund. My Jim!

James [*deeply moved*]. The possessive pronoun convinces me that you do. [*Smiling blandly.*] Sir, I will grant your most reasonable demand. [*Aims at Gerald.*]

Rosamund [*half shrieking*]. I don't love you if you shoot Gerald.

James. But, my dear, this is irrational. He has asked me to shoot him, and I have as good as promised to do so.

Rosamund [*entreating*]. James, in two hours we are to be married . . . Think of the complications.

Gerald. Married! To-day! Then I withdraw my request.

James. Yes; perhaps it will be as well. [*Lowers revolver.*]

Gerald. I have never yet knowingly asked a friend, even an acquaintance, to shoot me on his wedding-day, and I will not begin now. Moreover, now I come to think of it, the revolver wasn't loaded. Mr. Brett, I inadvertently put you in a ridiculous position. I apologise.

James. I accept the apology. [*The general tension slackens. Both the men begin to whistle gently, in the effort after unconcern.*]

Rosamund. Jim, will you oblige me by putting that revolver down somewhere. I know it isn't loaded; but so many people have been killed by guns that weren't loaded that I should feel safer . . . [*He puts it down on the table.*] Thank you!

James [*picking up letter*]. By the way, here's that letter that came just now. Aren't you going to open it? The writing seems to me to be something like Lottie Dickinson's.

Rosamund [*taking the letter*]. It isn't Lottie's; it's her sister's. [*Stares at envelope.*] I know what it is. I *know* what it is. Lottie is ill, or dead, or something, and can't come and be a wit-

ness at the wedding. I'm sure it's that. Now, if she's dead we can't *be* married to-day; it wouldn't be decent. And it's frightfully unlucky to have a wedding postponed. Oh, but there isn't a black border on the envelope, so she can't be *dead*. And yet perhaps it was so sudden they hadn't time to buy mourning stationery! This is the result of your coming here this morning. I felt sure something would happen. Didn't I tell you so?

James. No, you didn't, my dear. But why don't you open the letter?

Rosamund. I *am* opening it as fast as I can. [*Reads it hurriedly.*] There! I said so! Lottie fell off her bicycle last night, and broke her ankle — won't be able to stir for a fortnight — in great pain — hopes it won't *inconvenience* us!

James. Inconvenience! I must say I regard it as very thoughtless of Lottie to go bicycling the very night before our wedding. Where did she fall off?

Rosamund. Sloane Street.

James. That makes it positively criminal. She always falls off in Sloane Street. She makes a regular practice of it. I have noticed it before.

Rosamund. Perhaps she did it on purpose.

James. Not a doubt of it!

Rosamund. She doesn't want us to get married!

James. I have sometimes suspected that she had a certain tenderness for me. [*Endeavouring to look meek.*]

Rosamund. The cat!

James. By no means. Cats are never sympathetic. She is. Let us be just before we are jealous.

Rosamund. Jealous! My dear James! Have you noticed how her skirts hang?

James. Hang her skirts!

Rosamund. You wish to defend her?

James. On the contrary; it was I who first accused her. [*Gerald, to avoid the approaching storm, seeks the shelter of the screen, sits down, and taking some paper from his pocket begins thoughtfully to write.*]

Rosamund. My dear James, let me advise you to keep quite, quite calm. You are a little bit upset.

James. I am a perfect cucumber. But I can hear your breathing.

Rosamund. If you are a cucumber, you are a very indelicate cucumber. I'm not breathing more than is necessary to sustain life.

James. Yes, you are; and what's more you'll cry in a minute if you don't take care. You're getting worked up.

Rosamund. No, I shan't. [*Sits down and cries.*]

James. What did I tell you? Now perhaps you will inform me what we are quarrelling about, because I haven't the least idea.

Rosamund [*through her sobs*]. I do think it's

horrid of Lottie. We can't be married with one witness. And I didn't want to be married at a registry office at all.

James. My pet, we can easily get another witness. As for the registry office, it was yourself who proposed it, as a way out of a difficulty. I'm High and you're Low ——

Rosamund. I'm not Low; I'm Broad, or else Evangelical.

James [*beginning calmly again*]. I'm High and you're Broad, and there was a serious question about candles and a genuflexion, and so we decided on the registry office, which, after all, is much cheaper.

Rosamund [*drying her tears, and putting on a saintly expression*]. Well, anyhow, James, we will consider our engagement at an end.

James. This extraordinary tiff has lasted long enough, Rosie. Come and be kissed.

Rosamund [*with increased saintliness*]. You mistake me, James. I am not quarrelling. I am not angry.

James. Then you have ceased to love me?

Rosamund. I adore you passionately. But we can never marry. Do you not perceive the warnings against such a course? First of all you come here — drawn by some mysterious, sinister impulse — in breach of all etiquette. That was a Sign.

James. A sign of what?

Rosamund. Evil. Then you find that post-card, to remind me of a forgotten episode.

James. Damn the postcard! I wish I'd never picked it up.

Rosamund. Hush! Then comes this letter about Lottie.

James. Damn that, too!

Rosamund [*sighs*]. Then Gerald arrives.

James. Damn him, too! By the way, where is he?

Gerald [*coming out from behind the screen*]. Sir, if you want to influence my future state by means of a blasphemous expletive, let me beg you to do it when ladies are not present. There are certain prayers which should only be uttered in the smoking-room. [*The two men stab each other with their eyes.*]

James. I respectfully maintain, Mr. O'Mara, that you had no business to call on my future wife within three hours of her wedding, and throw her into such a condition of alarm and unrest that she doesn't know whether she is going to get married or not.

Gerald. Sir! How in the name of Heaven was I to guess ——

Rosamund [*rising, with an imperative gesture*]. Stop! Sit down, both. James [*who hesitates*], this is the last request I shall ever make of you. [*He sits.*] Let me speak. Long ago, from a mistaken motive of kindness, I gave this poor boy

[*pointing to Gerald*] to understand that I loved him; that at any rate I should love him in time. Supported by that assurance, he existed for four years through the climatic terrors of a distant isle. I, pampered with all the superfluities of civilisation, forgot this noble youth in his exile. I fell selfishly in love. I promised to marry . . . while he, with nothing to assuage the rigours ——

James. Pardon me, there was Evelyn's "Moonlight Sonata," not to mention Madge's eyes.

Rosamund. You jest, James, but the jest is untimely. Has he not himself said that these doubtless excellent young women were in fact nothing to him, that it was *my* image which he kept steadfastly in his heart?

Gerald. Ye—es, of course, Rosie.

Rosamund [*chiefly to James*]. The sight of this poor youth fills me with sorrow and compunction and shame. For it reminds me that four years ago I lied to him.

Gerald. It was awfully good of you, you know.

Rosamund. That is beside the point. At an earlier period of this unhappy morning, James, you asseverated that you could not dream of getting married with a lie on your lips. Neither can I. James, I love you to madness. [*Takes his inert hand, shakes it, and drops it again.*] Goodbye, James! Henceforth we shall be strangers. My duty is towards Gerald.

Gerald. But if you love *him?*

Rosamund. With a good woman, conscience comes first, love second. In time I shall learn to love *you.* I was always quick at lessons. Gerald, take me. It is the only way by which I can purge my lips of the lie uttered four years ago. [*Puts her hands on Gerald's shoulders.*]

James. In about three-quarters of an hour you will regret this, Rosamund Fife.

Rosamund. One never regrets a good action.

Gerald. Oh! well! I say . . . [*inarticulate with embarrassment*].

Rosamund [*after a pause*]. James we are waiting.

James. What for?

Rosamund. For you to go.

James. Don't mind me. You forget that I am in the War Office, and accustomed to surprising situations.

Gerald. Look here, Rosie. It's awfully good of you, and you're doing me a frightfully kind turn; but I can't accept it, you know. It wouldn't do. Kindness spoils my character.

James. Yes, and think of the shock to the noble youth.

Gerald. I couldn't permit such a sacrifice.

Rosamund. To a good woman life should be one long sacrifice.

Gerald. Yes, that's all very well, and I tell you,

Rosie, I'm awfully obliged to you. Of course I'm desperately in love with you. That goes without saying. But I also must sacrifice myself. The fact is . . . there's Madge . . .

Rosamund. Well?

Gerald. Well, you know what a place a steamer is, especially in calm, warm weather. I'm afraid I've rather led her to expect. . . . The fact is, while you and Mr. Brett were having your little discussion just now, I employed the time in scribbling out a bit of a letter to h d I rather fancy that I've struck one or two deuced good ideas in the proposal line. How's this for a novelty: "My dear Miss Madge, you cannot fail to have noticed from my behaviour in your presence that I admire you tremendously?" Rather a neat beginning, eh?

Rosamund. But you said you loved me.

Gerald. Oh, well, so I do. You see I only state that I "admire" her. All the same I feel I'm sort of bound to her, . . . you see how I'm fixed. I should much prefer, of course . . .

James. To a good man life should be one long sacrifice.

Gerald. Exactly, sir.

Rosamund [*steadying herself and approaching James*]. Jim, my sacrifice is over. It was a terrible ordeal, and nothing but a strict sense of duty could have supported me through such a trying

crisis. I am yours. Lead me to the altar. I trust Gerald may be happy with this person named Madge.

James. The flame of your love has not faltered?

Rosamund. Ah, no!

James. Well, if my own particular flame hadn't been fairly robust, the recent draughts might have knocked it about a bit. You have no more sacrifices in immediate view? . . . [*She looks at him in a certain marvellous way, and he suddenly swoops down and kisses her.*] To the altar! March! Dash! we shall want another witness.

Gerald. Couldn't I serve?

Rosamund. You're sure it wouldn't be too much for your feelings?

Gerald! I should enjoy it. . . . I mean I shan't mind very much. Let us therefore start. If we're too soon you can watch the process at work on others, and learn how to comport yourselves. By the way, honeymoon?

James. Paris. Charing Cross 1:30. Dine at Dover.

Gerald. Then you shall eat that lunch I have ordered at the Savoy.

Rosamund. Er — talking of lunch, as I'm hostess here, perhaps I should ask you men if you'd like a drink.

James and Gerald [*looking hopefully at each other*]. Well, yes.

Rosamund. I have some beautiful lemonade.

James and Gerald [*still looking at each other, but with a different expression*]. Oh, that will be delightful! [*Lemonade and glasses produced.*]

Gerald. I drink to the happy pair.

Rosamund [*a little sinister*]. And I — to Madge.

James. And I — to a good woman — Mrs. Pet [*looking at her fixedly*]. All men like a good woman, but she shouldn't be too good — it's a strain on the system. [*General consumption of lemonade, the men bravely swallowing it down. Rosamund rests her head on James's shoulder.*]

Rosamund. It occurs to me, Gerald, you only ordered lunch for two at the Savoy.

Gerald. Well, that's right. By that time you and James, if I may call him so, will be one, and me makes two.

[*Curtain.*]

[1899]

A QUESTION OF SEX

FARCE IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS

GEORGE GOWER, 27.

FRANCIS GOWER, his Well-preserved Bachelor Uncle.

MAY FOSTER, his Married Sister, 25.

HELEN STANTON, his Wife's Married Sister, 28.

A QUESTION OF SEX

SCENE.— *George Gower's drawing-room. Evening. George Gower is asleep in an easy-chair near the hearth. By his side is a fairly large occasional table, on which are some writing materials and an empty glass. Enter May Foster and Helen Stanton. They open the door quietly, and pause on the threshold to observe the sleeper. They are both in a pleased, gay mood of gentle excitation, but at first they speak low.*

May. The wretch still sleeps.

Helen. Yes. A man is a marvellous thing. *Such* talent in some directions.

May. Let's wake him now. I should think he'd had enough.

Helen. Enough! Well. . . . It's turned seven, and he must have dropped off just after lunch. Five hours!

May [*smiling kindly at her unconscious brother*]. Ah! He hasn't slept much for the last few nights; he's been so frightfully anxious.

Helen [*raising her eyebrows*]. Anxious! And what about his poor wife — what about Ada's anxiety? How he *could* sleep like this when he knew

perfectly well . . . [*lifts her hands, and finishes by smiling. The two young women approach George's chair on tiptoe, and indicate to each other by gestures that they will waken him in the orthodox way. Bending down, Helen sniffs at the empty glass*].

Helen. Um! Whisky. Naturally. [*She then bends to George's face to kiss him, but hesitates and looks at May.*]

Helen. Perhaps it would be better if you did it, dear. [*May quickly kisses him.*] The privileges of a sister-in-law vary in different families. [*George wakes up. May and Helen stand side by side facing him, their hands behind them, smiling, and full of mysteries.*]

George [*mechanically reaching out for the glass*]. What did you say? I do believe I dropped off for a second or two. [*Finding glass empty.*] Dash! What a thirst I've got on today!

Helen. There!

George. Well! What are you two staring at? How's Ada now? Doctor come yet?

May [*softly*]. George, it's a girl.

George. What's a girl? Who's a girl?

Helen. It's a girl. [*Pause, while the fact of his fatherhood dawns upon George.*]

George [*starting up*]. Well, I'm damned if this isn't the quickest thing of the kind that ever I heard of! [*He makes a bound for the door.*]

May [*both the girls seizing him*]. George, come back. You mustn't go to her. She's asleep. [*Soothing him, and trying to calm his sudden tremendous excitement.*]

George. Well, I *am* damned! Why, it can't be a quarter of an hour since I left her! [*Sinks back into chair.*]

Helen. George Gower, does it not occur to you that these terrible oaths are sadly, sadly out of place? Recollect that as a father you are considerably less than a day old. Blasphemy from lips so young is an instance of infant depravity, such as ever I, a district visitor, have seldom seen surpassed. Our curate at Ealing has composed a special form of prayer for young parents. I have brought it over with me, and I shall ask you to — to make it your own. In the meantime I beg you not to disgrace the sacred name of father. Think of poor, dear Ada. Ah, my darling sister has behaved splendidly! Think of what she has been through!

George. That's just what I am thinking of, and the more I think the more I can't ——

May [*interrupting him*]. Why, George, you silly, you've been asleep five hours, and ——

George. I swear I haven't.

Helen. No more swearing, I entreat. You *have* been asleep five hours. It's turned seven o'clock. Your daughter is some three hours old . . .

May. Yes, and everything went off beautifully. Ada cried a bit ——

Helen. Ada was simply superb.

May. Yes, she was, dear. She's asleep now, George. And the baby's the loveliest little thing ——

Helen. The doctor says he never saw a finer.

May. Yes, and nurse says so, too. And she's got *lots* of hair.

Helen. And cry —! She's got lungs like bellows.

George [*sitting up severely*]. Why didn't you come and wake me up? Answer me. For anything you knew, I might have been doing the most awful things to the sacred name of father during those three hours — and quite innocently. Helen, you at least . . . [*ends with a reproachful gesture*].

Helen. Well, I did ask May to go down and sit with you.

May [*to Helen*]. But, dear, I couldn't have dreamt of leaving Ada.

Helen. Why not, dear? I came over specially from Ealing, and left my own little ones and Ernest, in order to see after Ada myself.

May. And I came from Harrow, which is much further than Ealing. I haven't any little ones; but if I had I should have left them, I'm sure I should [*plaintively*]. I left Jack and the two kittens, and there was nothing else to leave.

Helen. But it is a question of experience, dear.

May. Well, I don't know, dear. It seems to me that common sense and a cool head are better than experience.

Helen. But surely, dear, you don't suggest —— Oh! [*Suddenly forgetting this little passage of arms, and thinking of something important.*] We didn't —— [*whispers in May's ear*].

May. Gracious heavens! Do you think nurse will remember?

Helen. Probably not. I have had three different nurses myself, and they're all alike. I'll just run up and see to it. [*George is mystified, as males are.*]

May. Oh, no! I'll go, dear.

Helen. Oh, no! I'll go, dear. Where were the safety pins put?

May. I know. I'll go.

Helen. My dear, I really think . . .

George. If it's anything serious, hadn't you better both go? Further delay might be fatal, and I should like to avoid being cut off in my infancy as a father.

Helen. May shall go.

May. Not at all. I should much prefer Helen to go. She is *so* experienced. [*A pause; and then Helen, pursing her lips, and looking as much like a martyred saint as she can, departs.*]

George. A girl! [*Sighs.*]

May. George, what's the matter? I thought all the time that you didn't receive our news with that ecstatic abandonment of joy which I believe is usual under the circumstances. Why aren't you glad and proud? Why don't you weep happy tears of relief and contentment? Is it possible you are so lost to all parental feeling as to be indifferent when your wife presents you with a dear little darling baby?

George. May, you're a very decent sort, but if you say two more words in that strain, I'll go upstairs and I'll wring that kid's neck. I couldn't permit any child of mine to be niece to a woman who talked like that. Remember that as a father I have duties, responsibilities.

May. You're not well. I see it now. You're suffering. Of course it must be a great strain on the system to wake up and find yourself a father. George, forgive my hasty speech. You must take a little nourishment every quarter of an hour till the symptoms pass. [*She pats him gently on the cheek.*] A great strain it was!

George. Strain! If you knew the strain I've been bearing for months past! Haven't you noticed the dark rings under my eyes, the unnatural brightness of my orbs, the hectic flush on my cheeks, the bald spot on the back of my head? Strain! . . . My dear sister, I have a secret and terrible woe — a woe which, with courage

worthy of an Englishman and a parent, I have shared with none. May, I am undone!

May [*with accents of despairing sorrowful sympathy*]. Who has undone you?

George. My beloved wife, three hours since, as I slept. I feared it. I have feared it for many weeks. Listen. Five or six months ago, Uncle Francis said that if *it* was a son, he would settle ten thousand pounds upon *it*.

May. And if a daughter?

George. He coldly declined to consider the possibility of such a thing. You know the special brand of ass he is sometimes. I said nothing to anybody, not even to my wife, for I felt that it would worry her. Imagine my condition of mind, my agonising suspense. Do you wonder that I have been wakeful night after night? Do you wonder that, from pure weariness and fatigue, I should fall asleep on this very afternoon of my undoing? Oh, May! To be a father is not so simple and pleasing as the superficial observer might fancy.

May [*sympathetically*]. It certainly isn't, especially if you happen to be occupied with being nephew to Uncle Francis at the same time.

George. Uncle Francis! Uncle donkey! Uncle nincompoop! Uncle booby! Uncle b——!

May. George!

George. Bachelor! — Pompous old bachelor.

Upon my soul, to see the way bachelors behave themselves in these days makes me sick.

May. Don't forget you were a bachelor yourself less than a year ago.

George. Only in practice; not in theory, not in theory. I maintain that all bachelors are idiots. Look at Uncle Francis! There's a nice sample! . . . I believe the beggar knew it would be a girl all the time. But in any case, why couldn't he keep his precious plan of benevolence to himself till I was actually a father. Then, unless the sex of my child happened to please his fastidious taste, he need have said nothing; I should have been spared all this anxiety, and I should have been no worse off.

May. Well, George, it's a great pity, of course. I suppose he won't withdraw the condition?

George [*sniffing*]. Not he!

May [*trying to be brave*]. After all, you *are* no worse off! Uncle hasn't robbed you of anything.

George. Oh, hasn't he? I like that! You aren't a father, May, and you can't enter into a father's feelings. Now what I feel is that he *has* robbed me. He's robbed me of precisely ten thousand pounds. Here am I, engaged in the arduous and expensive task of founding a family. I see ten thousand pounds within my grasp. The inhuman monster positively dangles it before me, and

then, through no fault of mine — I repeat, through no fault of mine — it is snatched away.

May [*caressing him*]. Never mind, George. You're doing splendidly in your profession, you know you are, and you'll soon have got a large practice together, and made ten thousand pounds all of your own. Never mind.

George. But I do mind. I *will* mind. I won't be robbed. I absolutely decline to be jockeyed out of a large sum of money on a mere — a mere — a mere quibble of physiology. The idea is revolting to my legal intellect. Something must be done, and done quickly.

May. I'm afraid it's a little late, George.

George. Rot! We must think of something — instantly. Uncle Francis is certain to call to-night. I wish he lived in the next hemisphere instead of in the next street; that would give us a chance. May, you must help me; I rely on you.

May. But really, George, I don't see ——

George. I shall be sure to think of some scheme in a minute or two. [*Re-enter Helen.*] Hush! I shan't say anything to her. . . . Well, sweet sister-in-law.

Helen [*delightedly to May*]. That darling is perfectly marvellous. Nurse brought her up to the light just now, and she blinked her eyes like anything.

May [*with equal delight and astonishment*]. No! Just fancy, George!

George. Yes. Imagine the intelligence involved in that apparently sin.ple act. That's what you call "taking notice," I suppose?

Helen. The little pet blinked her ridiculous little eyes several times.

George. About how many times?

Helen [*after looking at him*]. I daresay you think you're very funny, George. . . .

May [*instinctively coming to the rescue of the sex*]. George, don't be silly. You've no notion of good taste.

George. Well, she called my daughter's eyes ridiculous. I don't think that was quite in the best taste, especially after an acquaintance of only three hours.

Helen [*to George*]. Dear Ada is awake now, and she did say she would like to see you for a minute, but I doubt whether in your present mood — [*George is at the door in a second.*] George! [*Stopping him peremptorily.*]

George. Well?

Helen [*going up to him, and putting a hand on his arm entreatingly*]. Be good to her, George. And mind, you must only stay a minute or two. My dear [*to May*], you had better go with him. We cannot be too careful. And I will just scribble a line to Ernest. [*Sits down to write at table.*]

May [*to George*]. Now, papa. [*Exit George and May.*]

Helen [*reading what she writes*]. "My love. Just a word to let you know that all is well, and Ada has a little daughter, rather weak and puny, I fear, but we cannot expect all children to be as strong as ours. Ada was very brave, but it is fortunate I came, as no one seemed to have any idea of how to manage. May Foster is very kind-hearted, but *so* girlish. Shall return Thursday, if I can be spared. Love to the chicks. Don't forget what I told you about going to bed early. With fondest love from your little Nell. P.S. No time for more." [*Folding up letter. Enter Francis Gower, with hat and stick.*]

Francis. Good evening — er ——

Helen. Ah! Good evening. [*Getting up.*] I must introduce myself. I am Mrs. Ernest Stanton, George Gower's sister-in-law. You, I feel sure, are Mr. Francis Gower, George's uncle.

Francis [*shaking hands with assiduity*]. Delighted to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Stanton. You knew me for a Gower at once, then?

Helen. Yes, you have the unmistakable Gower eyes — wicked eyes — only more so. [*They sit down.*]

Francis. You flatter me.

Helen. Flatter you, Mr. Gower? How so? When I see eyes like yours I always say to myself

that their owner has ensured the happiness of some innocent and trusting woman ——

Francis. I beg pardon — I am not, er ——

Helen. By not marrying her.

Francis. In that sense I may certainly claim to be the benefactor of your sex. When I review in my mind the vast phalanx of charming women whom I have *not* married, I ——

Helen [*interrupting him drily*]. Of course you want to know about Ada?

Francis. Yes, I thought I would come round and inquire before sitting down to dinner. I was given to understand that there was an expectation, a surmise, a suspicion that — er ——

Helen. Well, Mr. Gower, I have good news for you. Ada has a daughter.

Francis. A daughter! How delightful! [*Smiles to himself with secret joy.*] You said a daughter?

Helen. Yes. Just after three this afternoon. Rather an unusual hour.

Francis. Indeed! Er —— Indeed! I fear I am quite at sea in the minute details of these matters. Are — are mother and child both doing well?

Helen. Splendidly, splendidly. My sister has behaved admirably. [*During the foregoing conversation Helen has just put her letter in an envelope, and addressed it. She now goes to the mantelpiece and rings bell.*]

Francis. And the child — how did *it* behave?

Helen [*smiling cautiously*]. Oh, well, Mr. Gower, as you say, you are rather at sea in these matters.

Francis. It is so difficult to mould one's inquiries in quite the right form. Now, at funerals, I assure you, I am unimpeachable. I have often been told so. Question of practice, I suppose. It is a most singular thing to me, having regard to the alarming increase in our population, how many funerals there seem to be, and how few births. Perhaps that has not occurred to you, Mrs. Stanton?

Helen [*after ringing bell again*]. Indeed not. Quite the opposite, in fact. Did you hear that bell ring?

Francis. Distinctly.

Helen. That is the fifth time I have rung it, at least. These events upset a household from attic to basement.

Francis [*mildly surprised*]. So far? Can I be of any assistance to you?

Helen. Oh, no, thanks. I only want to get this letter posted. If you will excuse me one second. [*He rises and opens door for her.*]

Francis. Of course George is in high spirits?

Helen [*going out*]. Oh, yes. But he conceals his feelings. Men do, you know. They think it's manly. [*Exit.*]

Francis. Just so. Well, Mother Nature, you

with the inscrutable ways — [*sits down*] you've saved me ten thousand pounds by this day's work. I reverence you. . . . You're a bit of the right sort. [*Smiling with silent satisfaction.*] I've got through safe this time, as it happens. But I must really cure myself of these fits of impulsive generosity. Now if it *had* been a boy, I suppose George would actually have expected me to fork out that ten thousand, and I suppose like a good-natured ass I should have done so. [*The door bursts open, and George and May enter quickly.*]

May [*to George, as they enter*]. *Isn't* she a pretty little thing? [*The two perceive Uncle Francis and stop short.*]

George. Yes, *he* is. [*With a tremendous portentous look at May, pulling himself together.*] Hullo, Uncle Francis!

May [*with a look at George appealing for instructions*]. Good evening, Uncle. Rather warm isn't it, for the time of year?

Francis. You look rather warm, my dear May. [*Shakes hands.*]

George. Well, what's the news, Uncle? [*Shakes hands.*] Been to the City?

Francis. No. This is the first time I've been out to-day. I thought I'd just walk round before dinner to inquire.

George. To inquire? About what? Oh! Ah! Yes, of course! You mean about Ada.

Well, Uncle, I'm glad to say it's all right, isn't it, May?

May. Yes, it's absolutely all right.

George. Ada is doing well, and I am the father of a fine boy.

Francis [*imperturbable*]. A boy!

George. Yes. Now, come, Uncle, bear up. I know it must be a blow to you. But, heavens! what's ten thousand pounds to a man of your fortune? Why, it's less than a fiver to me, isn't it, May?

May. Yes, George, it is. I think it was noble of you, Uncle, to offer that ten thousand pounds, though the actual parting with it, to a person of your economic mind, cannot fail to be agonising.

George. Yes, indeed. When I first heard that my child was a boy, I said: "I wish for uncle's sake it had been a girl." Didn't I, May?

May. You did, George. You were sitting in that chair, and I stood here, and you said: "I wish for uncle's sake it had been a girl." Those were the very words you used.

George [*to Francis*]. My sympathies went out instantly to you, Uncle. You who will have to write me a cheque for ten thousand pounds this very night. Personally, I should prefer to consider your offer cancelled. But I feel convinced that you would never consent to such a course.

You are a man of your word. You said you would settle ten thousand pounds upon my child if it was a boy. It *is* a boy, and you *will*.

Francis. You're sure it's a boy?

George [*aside to May*]. Now what the deuce —— [*to Francis*]. "Sure it's a boy!" Well, what do you take me for?

Francis. I take you for a father, suffering from some nervous disorder.

George. You mean I'm a little excited. Well, isn't that natural? You wait till you're a father, Uncle — I bet you it'll make you sit up. But fancy you asking me if I'm sure my own child is a boy!

May. Yes, fancy! Uncle, you should be more careful. To a man in George's delicate condition, so recently a father, anything in the nature of a shock might easily bring about the most serious results.

Uncle. You are right, my dear little girl. Pardon a rough old bachelor not accustomed to the etiquette of paternity. I suppose you haven't yet decided on a name, or names, for this marvellous infant?

George [*looking at May helplessly*]. Well, er ——

May. Dear Ada was saying only just now that at any rate he must be named Francis. Probably his name will be George Francis, but he will always be called Frankie, after you.

Francis. My dear, I am deeply touched by this little mark of consideration.

George. Yes, Uncle. Of course we aren't the sort of individuals that proclaim their private feelings from the house-tops [*Francis walks about and twists his moustache*], but we think a great deal of you — a great deal. We look up to you. We admire your notion of the duties and responsibilities of a great-uncle. We, er —— And perhaps you'd like to give me the cheque now, Uncle, and then you won't forget it. [*Francis takes no heed. Aside to May.*] If we can once get the cheque, he'll never stop it, you know, and we can undeceive him afterwards, and tell him it was a joke and all that sort of thing.

May. Er — [*goes up to Francis and puts her hands on his shoulders*]. You are a dear old thing! [*She is just about to kiss him when door opens and Helen enters.*]

George [*suddenly frantic*]. Helen, you'd better go upstairs; they've been knocking on the ceiling like anything for the last five minutes. I believe they want something.

Helen [*quietly*]. George, you've had too much whisky. I've just come from dear Ada. [*May has dropped her hands from Francis's shoulders and looks stonily at Helen.*]

George [*calmly desperate*]. Helen, this is Uncle Francis. You haven't met before, I think.

Helen. Oh, yes. We met a minute or two ago,

and I was telling Mr. Gower what a fine little girl Ada has. [*With a stifled shriek May sinks into a chair. George also sits down, lamentably sighing. Pause, in which only Helen is mystified.*]

Francis. Mrs. Stanton, as the head of the Gower family, I feel it my duty to apologise beforehand. You are about to witness what is known as a "scene" — that is, unless you would prefer to retire.

Helen. Not in the least, I assure you.

Francis. Not merely a "scene," but a "family scene"; which, I believe, is the most highly developed form of "scene" known to science.

Helen. Pray, don't mention it. I am quite accustomed ——. That is, short of bloodshed, I can stand anything. But I do think blood is horrid. [*Sits down with pleasurable anticipation.*]

Francis [*nodding suavely in acquiescence*]. The preliminaries being settled, we may proceed. George, why have you been lying to me?

George. Lying to you, Uncle?

May. Lying, Uncle? [*Suddenly crosses over to Helen and they embrace, Helen sympathetically rising to the height of May's emotion. May then sits down again.*]

Francis. I used the word.

George [*forcing a laugh*]. Oh, yes. I see what you mean. I see what you mean now. I see ——

Francis. What eyesight!

George. Well, I was just carried away by one of those sudden impulses that one has, you know. That was it, wasn't it, May?

May. Yes, George, that must have been it. The sort of thing that comes over you, Uncle, before you know where you are.

Francis. Comes over *me?*

George. No, Uncle, not you. You won't understand it, I'm afraid. You're too old. You've got past the age for impulse. It's a disease that comes somewhere between measles and gout. It only affects the younger generation.

Francis [*showing perhaps the slightest passing trace of heat*]. I'm too old, am I? I belong to the older generation, I suppose [*with terrible cold sarcasm*]. Toothless gums, palsied limbs, doddering idiot, and so on. [*Smiling calmly again, but distinctly very angry beneath the Arctic smile*]. If you look as well as me at forty-two, sir, you'll be lucky — damned lucky.

Helen [*half to herself, enjoying it*]. As Ernest often says, the band is beginning to play. I seem to hear the strains in the distance.

George [*getting up*]. Forty-two! . . . Uncle!

May [*with shocked surprise*]. Forty-two!

Francis. Sit down, sir.

George [*sitting down*]. Well — you called me a liar, but it occurs to me I'm not the only ——

Francis. Yes, I do call you a liar — a liar from

the basest, the most mercenary motives. You told me your child was a boy.

George. Tut, tut. A slip of the tongue. You exaggerate trifles. Besides, for anything I knew, my child *was* a boy. I admit I had been told it was a girl; but you know what women are, Uncle, especially at these times — absolutely unreliable. I was merely, as it were, hoping for the best.

Francis. Have you not just returned from viewing the body?

May [*musingly*]. *Now* we're at an inquest.

George. I saw a kind of vermilion blob, surrounded by woollen fabrics, and I was given to understand that what I beheld was a human nose. But before I could satisfy myself even on that minor point I was told to go, as Ada mustn't be excited.

Helen. I hope you'll all acquit me of any desire to take part in this scene; but do I gather, Mr. Gower, that George has attempted to deceive you as to the — er — sex of his — er — offspring?

Francis. You do gather, Mrs. Stanton; you emphatically do gather.

Helen. George, I'm surprised at you; I really am. To think that your poor dear wife should have gone through what she *has* gone through this day — and you not satisfied! George, I blush for you . . . Then you were ashamed of your daughter. You wanted a son: a son that you could train up in your own sinful habits of blas-

phemy, self-indulgence, and deceit! All I can say is, I'm *glad,* profoundly glad, that it *is* a girl.

Francis. Mrs. Stanton, so am I. You have a truly noble mind.

Helen [*continuing to George*]. What could be the object of such a childish deception? Even you must have foreseen that it couldn't last; that there must come a time when the dreadful secret would reach your good, kind uncle's ears.

Francis. I will tell you his object, Mrs. Stanton. As you may possibly have heard, I am an industrious and painstaking person. I work hard and live plainly, and by the exercise of those gifts which heaven has been pleased to grant to me, I have accumulated a fortune — some would call it a large fortune; I merely call it a fortune. I daresay I am worth a hundred thousand pounds. Now you might imagine that, possessing this and a clear conscience, I am happy. But there is another and a darker side to the picture which I am endeavouring to paint, Mrs. Stanton. I am cursed, continually cursed, in spite of what George is pleased to consider my advanced age, with an impulse — the impulse of unrestrained generosity. [*George and May exchange a look heavy with meaning.*] Acting under this impulse, about six months ago, when George imparted to me the information that — er — he, that Ada — when, I say, George, imparted to me the information, I said: "George, if your child is a boy, I will set-

tle ten thousand on him." You see boys are so helpless. A boy can't marry a rich husband; can't make his own clothes; can't, if the worst comes to the worst, go out as mother's help — that is why I said, "*if it is a boy* I will settle ten thousand pounds on your child." I was under no obligation to make the offer. I acted merely from impulse, the impulse of absurd generosity. And how does George repay me? By lying to me, and, what is worse, getting his sister to lie to me. In order to obtain a paltry ten thousand pounds he is willing to stain his honour with a lie. Bah! You, Mrs. Stanton, with characteristic insight and commonsense, have at once put your finger on the most despicable aspect of this painful affair. The lie was useless, futile, silly. [*A slight pause ensues after this damning indictment.*]

Helen. George, did your wife know of your uncle's offer?

George. No, I kept it from her. I thought it would worry her.

May. That's perfectly true, Helen. He said so to me himself.

Helen. I do not approve of secrets between husband and wife. It would have been better if you had told dear Ada.

George. But what difference could it have made? Uncle only made the offer ——

Helen. One never knows . . . Ah! George!

Francis [*suddenly to May*]. As for you, May, you have pained me beyond expression.

Helen [*interrupting with womanly tact*]. Now as I have been dragged into this little — shall I say "difficulty"? — let me end it for you. I always think it is such a pity to allow a quarrel to grow; one should stamp it out in the bud. George — and you, May — you must beg your uncle's pardon. I am sure he will grant it.

Francis [*with Christian resignation*]. Willingly.

George. Oh, very well then, if there is to be such a fuss about a mere nothing, a momentary forgetfulness, excusable I should have thought in a man suffering the first pangs of fatherhood, I beg pardon. I apologise. I grovel.

May. If uncle can take any pleasure in the self-abasement of a fellow-creature, and that fellow-creature a woman, I also grovel.

Helen [*brightly*]. There, there. That's all right. Shake hands. [*They shake hands with mutual forgiveness.*]

Helen. There! It's all done with and forgotten. A little tact, I have invariably found, is all that is necessary in these affairs, and I'm sure I'm very glad to have been of assistance. And now, Uncle Francis — I may call you uncle? — you will write out the cheque.

Francis. The cheque?

Helen [*calmly*]. The cheque for ten thousand pounds.

Francis [*almost staggered, yet still imperturbable*]. The cheque for ten thou——! [*Stops.*]

Helen. You surely are not going to withhold it — especially after George and May have apologised so prettily. You surely aren't going to cast a slur, as it were, upon my niece, and my poor dear sister who has behaved so splendidly to-day!

George [*suddenly tumbling to the game*]. You surely aren't going to ——

May. My dear uncle, you surely aren't going to ——

Francis [*after a pause*]. George, is your child a boy or is it not?

George. I'm informed that he isn't — that she isn't.

Francis. Well, then, upon what possible ground can you claim my ten thousand pounds? Allow me to remark that I have not the slightest intention of parting with it.

Helen. Mr. Gower, I am deeply disappointed in you. Common humanity alone —— [*Breaks off.*]

May. Uncle, you have pained me beyond expression. [*Both the women begin to cry softly.*]

George [*looking to heaven*]. My poor wife and innocent babe!

Helen. Great wealth may be to its owner a blessing or a curse. Alas! I fear it is too often the

latter. It hardens the heart, blunts the finer susceptibilities, and transforms into a fiend what under more favourable circumstances might have been a human being. I have noticed the same phenomena given in my own children when Ernest gives them sixpence.

Francis [*striving after dignity without self-consciousness*]. By Jove! It's eight o'clock. I shall be late for dinner.

Helen. Yes, that's it. Go — go — and consume dainties out of season, and drink expensive wines, while your own flesh-and-blood eat the bread of sorrow. Centre all your thoughts on yourself. Shut your eyes to the grief and suffering which surround you. Think only of the carnal appetite. There is the rich man all over!

May. Trample on us. Drag the Juggernaut of your gold across our defenceless bodies. What is the shriek of pain, the moan of anguish to you, so long as your millions increase and multiply.

George. Now, Helen, you see my uncle, my so-called uncle, in his true colours! [*Francis gazes with longing at the door.*]

Helen. I do, George. I do, and I cannot bear the sight. I will go to my poor sister who is to be robbed of ten thousand pounds for a mere — a mère indiscretion. I must try to comfort her as best I can. It will be a fearful shock to the poor thing. It might kill her, but of course she must be told.

George. True, the news may kill her, but, as you say, she must be told.

Helen. I will do my best to comfort her — I cannot say more. We must hope for the best.

George. Ah! *Her* you *may* comfort, but who shall pour balm into the wound of my defenceless child, whose career is blasted, so to speak, before it has cut its first tooth?

Helen. You may well ask, George. But you ask in vain. Wealth has no ear for the wail of an infant. Wealth is preoccupied with its dinner.

May [*appealingly*]. Uncle, are you quite, quite determined?

Francis [*coughing*]. Yes, May, I fear I am. And I insist on being allowed to depart.

All Three. Oh, go, go. Do not let us keep you from your repast.

Francis [*moving to door*]. Possibly — I say possibly — I may repeat my offer, if at some future time you, George — that is, Ada, should have a boy. I have noticed that some parents have large families — families in which both sexes are represented. If so ——

Helen. Alas! a frail hope, a hope probably delusive! Our dear curate at Ealing has nine daughters . . .

George [*with cold politeness*]. I thank you, Uncle Francis, but I have no expectation of being able to avail myself of your offer. Helen, we must resign ourselves.

Helen. We must.

May. Yes, yes.

Helen. But do not let us bear spite; Mr. Gower, we freely forgive you. Personally I shall pray for you.

May. Yes, Uncle, we feel it our duty to forgive you, and dear Helen will pray for you.

Helen [*showing her forgiveness, and with a new idea in her head*]. Before leaving, Mr. Gower, you must really come upstairs and see the baby. She's a charming little creature. [*Aside to George while Francis is collecting his hat and stick.*] If we could get him upstairs —— [*George comprehends that in the presence of maternity and infancy, his uncle may be less obdurate.*]

Francis [*edging towards the door*]. I do not doubt it, but I would really prefer to be excused.

Helen. But Ada said to me specially that you were to go up. She wants you dreadfully to see her baby, her first-born. You must feel how heavy the little dear is.

Francis. I shall be charmed to — when it is a little bigger.

May. Surely you will not disappoint dear Ada! Surely you don't bear malice!

Francis. I would rather . . .

George [*taking him by the arm*]. Come along, Uncle, we'll all go.

Helen. Yes, we'll accompany you. You needn't be afraid.

Francis [*for the first time showing signs of losing his equanimity; faintly*]. Not to-night. Some other time.

George. Oh, come on!

Francis [*holding back with all his strength*]. George, I will not. The two great rules of my life are never to enter a sick-room, and never to handle babies. And you ask me to break them both at once.

Helen. Oh, stuff!

May. The man's shy, actually. Make him come, George.

Francis [*appealingly*]. No, no, George, I entreat. I once handled a baby.

All Three. Well?

Francis. I dropped it! [*Consternation.*]

May. Did it die?

Francis. No, I have sometimes wished it had.

George. Who was it?

Francis. It was you, George, and your mother fainted.

George. Oh! You dropped me, did you? Was I injured for life, maimed, crippled?

Francis. Happily not.

George. A jolly good thing for you. I'll teach you to drop me and make my mother faint. Come on now!

Francis. Excuse me, I pray you to excuse me. [*To himself.*] I'd give a good deal to be out of this.

Helen [*solemnly*]. How much would you give?

May. Would you give a lot?

George. Would you give ten thousand pounds? [*Almost shaking him. Dramatic pause.*]

Francis [*faintly, but quite self-possessed again*]. I feel *it* coming.

Helen. What?

Francis. It. My impulse of extravagant generosity, my terrible charitableness. [*He makes an inarticulate noise.*] There! There!

May. Perhaps pen and ink would assuage the agony.

Francis. Perhaps. [*They lead him to the table. He sits down and pulls cheque book out of his pocket. May hands him the pen. He begins to write.*]

Helen [*reading over his shoulder*]. "Pay George Gower ten thousand pounds." . . . Now the signature.

Francis [*pausing on the verge of the signature*]. Understand! I don't have to see that baby till it's six months old, and I don't have to handle it till it's a year — no, *two* years old. [*George nods, all smiles. Francis signs with a flourish. Tears cheque out of book, and hands it to May. May hands it to George, who receives it in ecstatic silence. Francis heaves a profound sigh.*]

[*Curtain.*]

[1899]